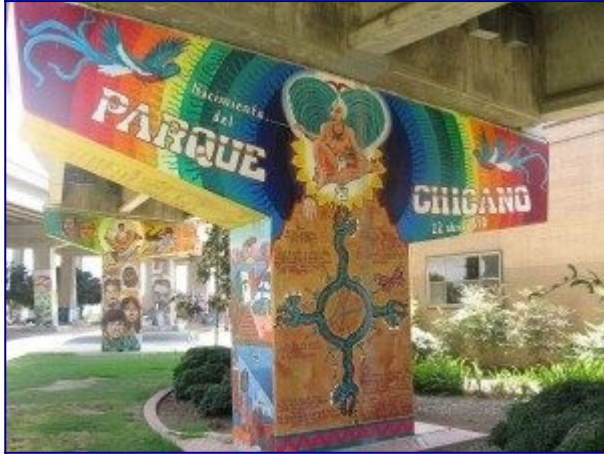


A Missing Link to Greatness: San Diego Artist Guillermo ‘Yermo’ Aranda

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“Yermo” Aranda will be at Chicano Park’s 47th Anniversary on Saturday, April 22, 2017 at Booth # 48 By Maria-Elena Ugalde



On January 11, 2017, Chicano Park was recognized as a National Historic Landmark. Native San Diegans and art historians are probably unaware of the hidden history behind San Diego’s Chicano Park murals. These murals appear to be linked to Mexico’s rich history and to legendary muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, who inspired Gilberto Ramirez, and Guillermo “Yermo” Aranda, artist and chairman of Toltecas en Aztlán – a local Chicana/o artists’ collective group who also initiated the murals at Chicano Park.

San Diego’s Chicana/o murals did not simply materialize; a timeline suggests they appeared through a series of events. “It was turbulent in the late 1960s and early 1970s with protests of the Vietnam War and for human rights” recalls Jim Brega, San Diego State University (SDSU) alumnus.

Expressive art protests led to Chicana/o murals appearing both locally and afar. Mexico’s muralist, Gilberto Ramirez, seems to be a crucial missing link and a monumental unsung hero of San Diego’s Chicano Park murals. In Mexico, Ramirez was an apprentice to the legendary Mexican muralist Siqueiros (1896-1974.) Siqueiros is recognized as one of “Los Tres Grandes,” one of the three great muralists of Mexico, along with Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco.

“During the fall of 1969, Ramirez came to San Diego to see what was happening in the local Chicano Movement,” recalls Guillermo “Yermo” Aranda, a San Diego native. Aranda, and Ruben DeAnda were both students – Aranda at SDSU and DeAnda at a community college – who assisted Ramirez in producing a large, canvas, three-piece mural located inside the Aztec (student) Center at SDSU. This mural was originally named *Amanacer*, dawn. Each panel is about 20’ H and 12’ W. Throughout the process of painting *Amanacer*, Ramirez taught Aranda and De Anda techniques and processes for initiating, working on and completing large scale murals. Initially, monies were needed in production and supplies for the mural. Aranda assisted Ramirez in securing funds from SDSU. While working on

Amanacer, “Ramirez constantly talked about Mexico City, urging us (his assistants) to go see the murals done by Siqueiros, Rivera, and Orozco,” states Aranda.

Amanacer was started in the fall of 1969, and completed in January 1970. On December 7, 1970 the *San Diego Union* newspaper published “S.D. State Unveils Mural to Honor Chicano Crusade” announcing the SDSU mural. In 2009, Jim Brega donated Ramirez’s original drawings for *Amanacer* (Today it is called “Triptico,” refers to triptych) back to SDSU. On March 7, 2014, John Gibbins with *U-T San Diego* newspaper recognized the rededication for mural “Triptico,” located inside SDSU’s new Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union. After *Amanacer*’s completion, Aranda went to Mexico City to see what Ramirez had described. The murals by Siqueiros captivated his attention with their “perspective” and “foreshortening” – spatial illusionary techniques creating three-dimensional depth and volume.

Ramirez and Siqueiros transformed Aranda’s concept of art. Ramirez inspired his apprentice, Aranda, who in 1969, began drawings to create his own mural, *La Dualidad*, the duality of life, (1970-1984). Measuring 16’ H by 46’ W, it is a large-scale indoor mural painted onto the building’s interior, circular wall of the Centro Cultural de la Raza (“The Centro”) in Balboa Park. Currently, it has minimal local documentation. Still, it was initiated at The Centro the same year that *Amanacer* at SDSU was completed. On January 6, 1984 the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper’s San Diego County section recognized *La Dualidad* in the article “Mural Tells Story of Artist and a People.” Also, the *Chula Vista Star-News* dated January 12, 1984 acknowledged *La Dualidad* “13 Years Later, NC Artist Finishes His Mural.”

Aranda’s *La Dualidad* reveals influences of both Ramirez and Siqueiros, it contains three sections just as Ramirez’s *Amanacer*. Integrating Siqueiros’ influence, Aranda emulates “perspective” and “foreshortening.” In the *San Diego Union*’s 12/7/1970 article, Aranda stated “Ramirez worked 12 hours a day” on *Amanacer*. Moved by Ramirez’s dedication, Aranda worked on *La Dualidad* daily from six to 20 hours in 1970 to 1975. Aranda told his sister, Maria “Lolie” Aranda, that he recalls waking up on the scaffolding in The Centro after working on *La Dualidad* all night, paintbrush in hand. Simultaneously, “Yermo” Aranda was organizing for Mexican youth organizations (he is co-founder of the Mexican American Youth Association [MAYA] along with Johnny “Juan” Lopez at SD City College), Aranda was also involved with protests and other activist endeavors.

A handful of times, Ramirez checked in on his protégé, Aranda, who was absorbed in painting *La Dualidad*. Aranda and one of his assistants, Ernesto “Neto” Paul, recall guys joking with Ramirez, “If you were an apprentice to Siqueiros, then what are you doing here (in San Diego)?” Ramirez, a quiet man, calmly responded in Spanish that he would rather be the head of a mouse than a tail of a lion.

In 1973, as director of The Centro and chairman of Toltecas en Aztlán, Aranda issued a public invitation to the attendees at the third-year anniversary of Chicano Park: “We (Toltecas en Aztlan) are inviting you to join us in painting the first murals of Chicano Park.”

***Early chronological list of Chicano murals related to Aranda: (*Note: pillars have four sides)**

1. 1969-1970, Ramirez's Amanecer at SDSU's Aztec Center, assistants Aranda and DeAnda.
2. 1970-1984, Aranda's La Dualidad inside wall of The Centro, assistants Guillermo Rosette and many others (names painted on mural's wall.)
3. 1972 Our History "Neto" Paul's idea under Aranda's tutelage at San Ysidro's Recreation Center, assistants Sammy Llamas, Eduardo "Tochtah" Nunez, Mario Paul, and Gustavo Vasquez
4. 1973 Chicano Park (Initiation to completion, approximately three to four months) initial first two embankment walls on Logan Avenue. Aranda regarded as lead artist by his peers of local artists during this time. "Most dedicated artists during initiation of Chicano Park murals" include Salvador Barajas, "Neto" Paul, Arturo Roman, and Rosette. ["Author's Emphasis"]
5. 1973 Fuerzos Naturales, at Tlatepaque Restaurant in Placentia, CA. Aranda, assistant "Neto" Paul, and students from University of California, Irvine (UCI.) UCI professor invited Aranda to teach students mural painting; these students were later named the "Santa Ana Artists."
6. 1974 Hijo del Sol, the first pillar at Chicano Park with "Santa Ana Artists," invited by Aranda. A collaborative design, arranged compositionally by Aranda.
7. 1975 the third and fourth pillars at Chicano Park were given to the "Royal Chicano Air Force" (RCAF) an artist group from Sacramento, assistant by Aranda.
8. 1975 The Centro's outside building's wall, "Four Original-Founding Artists of The Centro's Exterior Walls" (divided into quarters): Aranda, Barajas, "Neto" Paul, and Roman. ["Author's emphasis"]

This direct link likely broadens the span of influence for Mexican mural art history; the history described here seems to differ from previous documentation. The timeline of events suggests a tangible connection between San Diego, California's Chicano Park murals spanning back to Mexico's muralists Gilberto Ramirez and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

In 2010, Aranda received a B.A. in integrated studies with a focus on communication design and fine arts from California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). Currently, Aranda shares mural traditions working with elementary students in Northern California and inmates in a California state penitentiary.

Maria-Elena Ugalde loves music, words, and creating. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a minor in women studies from SDSU – credentials which support her writing. She was published in La Prensa, "SD's Introduction to Chicano Mural Art Rededicated at SDSU" on March 14, 2014. She is born and raised in San Diego, CA. She is the niece of Guillermo "Yermo" Aranda.